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“If These Men Could Still Talk...”

Throughout history and the development of psychology, there have been numerous theorists that have contributed their thoughts and ideas. Two of the most notable and recognized theorists are Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget. While one studied the process of personal development and the other studied cognitive theory, they both made significant contributions and influenced the studies and research of countless other people. As in depth as their research and studies were, there is always room for questions (Cherry, Kendra).

After going through a tumultuous childhood, Erik Erikson began teaching the arts in Vienna. It was there that he underwent psychoanalysis with Anna Freud and became interested in the area himself. Once his studies were completed at the Vienna Psychoanalytic Institute, his wife and he were forced to move from Vienna to Denmark and eventually to the United States in order to escape the Nazi's. It was in the United States that Erikson developed his theories of the stages of psychosocial development that many consider to be his most important work (“Erik Erikson”).

There were many experiences in Erikson's childhood that could easily have influenced his personal development and the development of his theories. If I were to have the opportunity to sit down with Erik Erikson and ask him one question, I would ask him, "To what extent did your experiences growing up impact the development and final product of your stages of development?" While researching Erikson, it seemed as though that thought was the one I kept coming back to ("Erik Erikson").

Erikson was born into a time, a world and a family that was critical of the situation surrounding his birth. Erikson's mother, Karla Abrahamsen, was married at the time of his birth. However, Erikson's father was not Karla's husband. This was the early 1900's and would have brought great shame to the family, so this information was kept concealed. In fact, Erikson himself would not learn the truth of his origins until he was much older ("Erik Erikson"). Ironically, the first stage in Erikson's theory of development is hope: basic trust versus mistrust. Although he wouldn't have known it when he was young, as he got older and learned of the conditions surrounding his birth and the fact that they were hidden from him, he could easily establish a sense of distrust between his mother and her following husbands (Harder, Arlene F).

The second stage in his theory is the stage of will: autonomy versus shame and doubt and this takes place during the time the child is a toddler. This stage focuses on the child building a sense of confidence and identity (Harder, Arlene

F). However, for Erikson, by the time he turned seven, his name had already changed due to his mother remarrying. In 1902 when Erikson was born, he was given the last name of the man his mother was married to and not his biological father, Salomonsen. In 1904 his mother remarried and Erikson eventually took on the last name Homburger which was the name of his step-father ("Erik Erikson"). Erikson believed that during this stage, it was important for children to make their own decisions such as which toys to play with or which foods to eat. But for Erikson, he didn't even have a choice as to what his name was going to be which could easily be translated into a confusion of identity (Harder, Arlene F).

Following will, the third stage is purpose: initiative versus guilt and takes place during the kindergarten/ preschool years. It is important for children going through this stage to be able to take control in their social lives and with their families (Harder, Arlene F). It was during this stage of his life that Erikson would be watching his mother and stepfather and trying to take on appropriate roles. He might have felt comfortable with what he was seeing or he may have felt as though he was in an abnormal situation and he may have developed a sense of guilt ("Erik Erikson").

During the early school years of a child's life, the fourth step takes place, competence: industry versus inferiority. This stage places a large emphasis on the child's interaction and experiences with his peers and schoolmates (Harder, Arlene F). For Erikson, this proved very difficult. Born and raised Jewish, it proved to be

a characteristic that only caused him to stand apart from his peers in grammar school. Born to a Danish father, Erikson had very Nordic qualities to his looks. He had blue eyes, blonde hair and was very tall. These all caused him to stand out from his peers in the Jewish community. It seemed as though no matter which group of children Erikson was with, he could not quite find a place or way to associate with them (“Erik Erikson”).

The first four stages in Erikson’s theory are influenced by the outside surroundings and people in a child’s life. Those first stages involve what the child goes through or experiences. However, as the child gets older and goes through the remaining four stages of development, they are more dependent on where the individual sees themselves and which direction and choices they take or make (Harder, Arlene F).

Once Erikson was old enough to begin making his own decisions, he began his academic work and teachings. He began by teaching the arts in Vienna and from there developed his interest in psychoanalysis and personality. From his own psychoanalysis to his teachings at Harvard, Yale and University of California at Berkeley, Erikson went through his remaining stages of development in determining his life path and meaning (“Erik Erikson”).

I think that if Erikson were able to answer my question, “To what extent did your experiences growing up impact the development and final product of your stages of development?” he would say that his own childhood drastically affected

the creation of his theory. It seems as though each stage of his theory could very easily be applied to some experience he went through himself. Erikson would not have known he was going through those stages himself as they occurred, but I have a strong feeling that as he was developing the stages of his theory, he reflected back on what he went through and how he felt and how they impacted him when he was at those ages.

As with any person, had Erikson come from a different upbringing, he may have formed his stages of development differently. Say for example, he had not been conceived out of wedlock and had been raised in a family with his two biological parents still married, it could have influenced how he viewed the roles of adults. Or say, for example, he had either not been born Jewish or born with the physical features he had. If Erikson had been more easily able to fit in with his peers, he might not have considered that stage of development as important as he did. Even eighty years after his theory was developed, the stages can still be applied to modern day children (“Erik Erikson”).

Like Erikson, Jean Piaget also studied the development of children. However, rather than focusing on the psychosocial development of children, Piaget studied the cognitive development process they went through. There were many different aspects to Piaget’s theories. Much of his research has been divided into four phases. However, the part of his research that I found the most interesting was his four cognitive developmental stages: sensorimotor stage, preoperational

stage, concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. If I could ask Jean Piaget a question, I would want to know how permanent these stages were to humankind. By that I mean as the human species continues to grow and develop and the society children live in changes, does he think these four stages would still continue to be relevant (“Jean Piaget”)?

The first stage, known as the sensorimotor stage, takes place from birth until the age of two. Piaget takes this stage and continues to break it down into six smaller stages. It is during this time that the child is unaware of other people living around them. Children learn to use reflexes and form habits during this stage. This is the stage of motion and sensations. It seems as though much of what Piaget describes during this stage is the child become aware of his/her body and it's physical capabilities (“Piaget's Cognitive Stages”).

I believe that Piaget would say that regardless of how culture or the human species can change in the future, this stage will remain the same. While some of the later stages refer more to the mental and logical development of the children, this stage focuses mainly on physiological developments the child undergoes. All infants who are born healthy, come into the world at the same starting point. All infants are born with the same physical needs and until they are aware of their surroundings and culture, the body develops the same. Regardless of the family the child is born into, all babies learn to move their muscles and their limbs. This stage is still going to take place with every infant.

The second stage Piaget discusses is the preoperational stage, which takes place between the ages of two and seven. This stage seems to be similar to Erikson's stage of will. It is during this stage that children become very imaginative and do a lot of role playing and pretending. Piaget also states that during this stage children cannot completely understand logic or concrete information ("Piaget's Cognitive Stages").

I think that this would be another stage that Piaget would say would continue to remain constant. Regardless of the culture a child is born into, this stage is present. In the typical modern American culture, children at this age will play house or school or use objects as play items pretending they are something completely different. In the Native American culture, cornhusks are made into dolls or animals for the children to play make believe with ("Native American-Corn Husk Dolls"). In the Amish culture, scraps of material are manipulated into similar objects. In these three very different cultures, the adults have found that the children at that age need toys of that nature to express their creativity ("Jean Piaget").

The third stage in Piaget's research is the concrete operational stage. This takes place from the end of the preoperational stage until the age of twelve. It is during this stage that the child begins to form more complex mentality. The child learns how to understand and use some logic as well as to understand the concept of reversibility. It is through this concept that children begin to understand that

some actions can be reversed and also understand a more complex train of thought. It is during this stage that the child begins to see the world from a wider viewpoint, beginning to understand how the other people around them also influence their lives (“Piaget’s Cognitive Stages”).

This is the stage where I think Piaget may have started to see some disconnect as the societies of the world began to change. While children will still go through this phase, I feel that in modern times, children may begin to go through this stage at a younger age. An extreme of this example would be a very traditional tribal African culture. Many children in a culture such as this take on a much more mature role at a younger age than a child in American culture. Oftentimes, if the parents pass away, the eldest child, sometimes as young as ten, would have to take on a more mature mentality (“African People and Culture-Tribes”). In this instance, the child would have to move on to the fourth stage at a much younger age than twelve. However, for most children growing up in a modern culture, this stage is still prominent. It is during this age that many children begin to be given more responsibilities around the house and would be able to understand why their contributions are important (“Piaget’s Cognitive Stages”).

The final stage, according to Piaget, is the formal operational stage, from age twelve on. This is the stage where children begin to view the world from a more logical and abstract point of view. People in this stage can look at an issue or

an idea less concretely and use other methods rather than trial and error to learn. He believed that children in this stage learned how to use deductive reasoning to come to a conclusion. Children can also systematically approach a problem during this stage rather than simply relating it to a similar past event. It is also during this stage that children began to develop the skills of long-term planning rather than thinking of the direct results of their actions (“Piaget’s Cognitive Stages”).

I think this would be the stage where Piaget might disagree that his theory fits in with children in the current times. I agree that this stage still occurs. However, I think that this stage is definitely occurring at a much younger age than twelve. Piaget said that it is during this stage children learn how to solve mathematical and scientific problems. I feel as though with the current school systems, most children are learning these skills at a much younger age. Children are learning to think logically and abstractly and problem solve in elementary school rather than middle school (“Piaget’s Cognitive Stages”).

I would love to know if Piaget would agree with my reflection and understanding of this change in the fourth stage. I think that compared to a hundred years ago or even fifty years ago, children are growing up and maturing much faster. Not to say that they still don’t have many of the same developmental and creative aspects those children did. I just feel that the evolution and development of our school systems has played a major role in the path the learning of modern children has taken. These children are being given tools and resources

to develop their minds that were never previously available to children. It can only be imagined how the school systems and development of children will continue to change in the future. I am sure that modern theorists in psychology will be creating new studies and new theories to appropriately reflect the development of children as time and society continues to change.

Both Erikson and Piaget were major contributors to developmental psychology. Although the research conducted by both theorists was very thorough, there are still questions that could be asked. If I were to have the opportunity to speak to each of them, my questions would have to do with their personal opinions relating to their works. I would love to ask Erikson how his personal life influenced his work. I would also love to find out Piaget's opinion on the permanence, universality and relevance of his theory into the 21st century and the future. I think it would be very interesting to find out if and how his research would have changed had it been done during a different time in history. While although there is no way to say for sure how Erikson and Piaget would answer these questions, all that can be done is to do research and make educated guesses. I think that based upon my research and what I learned, my answers to these questions would be very close to how they might answer the questions themselves.

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